

Give us help to help ourselves

By Noel Pearson

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“There is nothing that government can do for you that you are also unwilling to do for yourselves”. These were Prime Minister John Howard’s words to the indigenous people of Cape York Peninsula at Aurukun in 2003.

I thought to myself: no more appropriate words could be said about the challenges we face as a people, and the role of government in supporting us.

After seven wasted years of gridlock and inaction, the Howard Government was beginning to get its indigenous policy wheels turning. At the level of philosophy the conservatives had a keener understanding of the problems, without which there could be no clarity around solutions.

Labor remained steadfast in denial about passive welfare and the social and cultural breakdown occasioned by substance abuse – and how the bastardised form of self-determination had come to mean entitlement without responsibility. It was not until Chris Evans became shadow spokesman that Labor shook its old mindset.

It is one thing to get the philosophy clear; it is another to get the policies right and then to get them implemented. And implementation failure in indigenous affairs is as much a feature of the provincial governments as the Commonwealth. The so-called Council of Australian Governments (COAG) trials conducted in one site in each of the states and territories, were a failure.

Progress is definitely being made in some areas, and federal Indigenous Affairs Minister Mal Brough’s military energy and cut-through is light years ahead of the lethargy and indifference of his predecessors. The Department of Employment and Workplace Relations is probably the most competent of all the federal agencies, and their efforts in increasing indigenous employment and breaking down the make-work ghettos that the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) had descended into, is painful but correct policy.

But the Commonwealth efforts in indigenous policy suffer from some fundamental flaws. The most profound flaw is that there is no recognition of the rights of indigenous Australians as the original peoples of this country. This is not an easy issue and the necessary measures cannot be done in a perfunctory or expedient way.

There were hopeful signs when the Prime Minister told the Reconciliation Workshop in Canberra in May 2005: “We recognise that communal interest in and spiritual attachment to land is fundamental to indigenous culture. We support very strongly the notion of indigenous Australians desiring to turn their land into wealth for the benefit of their families. We recognise the cultural importance of communal ownership of land, and we are committed to protecting the rights of communal ownership and to ensure that indigenous land is preserved for future generations.

“And when I talk about land in this context let me make it clear that the Government does not seek to wind back or undermine native title or land rights. Rather we want to add opportunities for families and communities to build economic independence and wealth through use of their communal land assets. We want to find ways to help indigenous Australians secure, maximise and sustain economic benefits. We want to make native title and communal land work better.

“And that in recognising that a new spirit of responsibility is needed on an individual basis by indigenous communities and that passive welfare is a poison for indigenous communities, as it is for the rest of the Australian community, I say in the name of the Government that we will reach out. We will meet the indigenous people of this country more than half way if necessary”.

However there have been no developments since then, and no one has met anyone half way, let alone more than halfway. This is as much a failure of indigenous leadership even as it is a greater failure of the government.

But I will put aside the question of recognition of the rights of indigenous people in order to discuss other key flaws in the Commonwealth's approach, which undermines the genuine reforms they are seeking.

Firstly, there is an underlying antipathy to indigenous people as collectives. It is true that the notion of community in indigenous policy was (and still is) thoroughly problematic, and that previous approaches based on proto-communist conceptions of indigenous societies buried the role of individuals and families. But the Commonwealth goes too far the other way and tries to ignore the fact of community. Instead they should realise that successful and healthy individuals and families make up successful and healthy communities.

Following the abolition of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC), there is now a deep-seated and widespread contempt and opposition to indigenous organisations on the part of the Commonwealth. Yes, many of the incentives that existed previously resulted in much irrationality on the part of indigenous organisations and structures, but corporate entities are as much necessary evils in mainstream society as they are in indigenous communities. By all means reform the incentives, but do not think that you can achieve reforms in indigenous policy without indigenous organisations and leaders.

One of the problems is that the idea that ATSIC was the sole source of all previous failure is one that has sunk deep into public policy myth. The politicians and bureaucrats who hold ATSIC as the black scapegoat, forget that health, education and employment and training (areas of equal failure to those areas which came under ATSIC's purview) were the responsibility of mainstream government departments. Indeed, one of ATSIC's great success stories – fostering private home ownership off Aboriginal lands through its home loans program – is overlooked.

There has been a sentiment within the policy drivers of the Commonwealth that indigenous organisations are inherently susceptible to corruption and malpractice, and a scorched-earth approach to their eradication is necessary. This sentiment has not gained complete currency within the government, but it is still very powerful. This has led to an uncritical belief that the mainstreaming of every service and function will achieve better results. As if indigenous communities can now rely on mainstream local government bodies to provide services? Or rely on hopeless government agencies delivering pig-swill healthcare and schooling (as they do now)?

If there is not a mainstream governmental agency to undertake a service, indigenous programs are now farmed out to non-government bodies such as The Smith Family and the St Vincent de Paul Society. With all due respect to these organisations, but they are as much steeped in passive welfare delivery as governments.

The second flaw in the approach of the Commonwealth is that it is not reaching out to the people who are the supposed to be the subjects of reformed policy: the black fellas. Bracing reforms necessarily involves tension and abrasions, but if the indigenous community is not going to be brought along with the reforms, how are they going to get traction?

The use of prerogative powers to override relationship problems is not a sustainable way to govern and ultimately does not work. Because those who have problems must be engaged in their resolution.

Which brings me to the many problems involved in the review of the housing and infrastructure programs provided to the Commonwealth by PricewaterhouseCoopers last week. I strongly endorse the proposals for home ownership on Aboriginal lands. However I cannot see the sense in mainstreaming indigenous housing in urban and regional areas. What is so great about the Queensland public housing authorities compared to indigenous housing cooperatives? Why replace a decentralised socialised housing structure with a centralised one? You are just moving families from one species of public housing to another. Rather the Commonwealth should work with the indigenous housing cooperatives on three agendas.

First, indigenous housing cooperatives should be provided the flexibility to use their existing housing stocks to raise capital for the purchase and construction of new stock. Provided an appropriate prudential framework is put in place, the mainstream financial institutions will readily provide the

additional capital for these cooperatives to increase their housing stock. The caveats restricting the cooperatives will need to be lifted, but this is a way of increasing housing for indigenous people that does not involve further grant-funding.

Second, the Commonwealth should develop a framework for these cooperatives to move decisively towards a transition to home ownership on the part of their indigenous tenants. Yes, there are privatisation disaster stories and all sorts of objections will be raised against the idea that indigenous families should own their own homes rather than be happy tenants for all of their lives, but questions about affordability and income levels need to be addressed in the framework.

Third, these cooperatives could and should become more than just housing agencies. They could provide income management and financial literacy facilities for their indigenous family members. In our developing experience in Cape York Peninsula, there are four key areas which each and every family needs to get sorted out on. Firstly, they need to manage their money. Secondly, they need to ensure the health of all of their members is attended to. Thirdly, they need to get engaged in their children's education. Fourthly, they need to have a healthy home in which they feel secure and proud.

Why does the Commonwealth not see these housing co-operatives as a way to reach indigenous families in urban and regional areas, so that they can get their family lives sorted out? Not just collect the rent and organise the housing maintenance, but sit down with the families and make a plan that ultimately involves the family getting out of the rent system and owning their own place. Give them access to people who can help them work out a budget and show them how, if they manage their money, some of their hopes and dreams for themselves and their children, can be realised.

Instead of heeding the Prime Minister's words to the people of Cape York, the message from the Commonwealth Government seems to be: "Government will do everything for you that we are unwilling to let you do for yourselves."

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